



The Face of
MAMMON

The MATTER OF MONEY in
ENGLISH RENAISSANCE LITERATURE

David Landreth

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*The Matter of Money in English
Renaissance Literature*

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The Face of Mammon

For my parents

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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations ix

Acknowledgments xi

Introduction: Mammon in the Tudor Common Wealth 3

1. At Home with Mammon: Matter, Money, and Memory in *The Faerie
 Queene* and *The Jew of Malta* 52

2. Monetary Policy: *King John* and *Measure for Measure* 102

3. Dismembering the Ducat in *The Merchant of Venice* 150

4. Wit without Money in Donne and Nashe 184

Afterword: Before Economy 227

Appendix: Tudor Monetary Units 239

Notes 243

Works Cited 321

Index 339

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Figure 1:	Earlier Henry VII groat: face and reverse	18
Figure 2:	Late Henry VII groat, featuring a life portrait: face	18
Figure 3:	1549 debased shilling of Edward VI: face and reverse	19
Figure 4:	1562 Elizabeth sixpence, milled issue: face and reverse	30
Figure 5:	1553 Mary groat: face and reverse	31
Figure 6:	1554 Philip and Mary shilling: face	31

CHAPTER TWO

Figure 7:	Woodcut from Henry Peacham, <i>Minerva Britannia</i> (1612): “Crimina gravissima”	126
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CHAPTER FOUR

Figure 8:	Elizabeth angel, face and reverse	188
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The Face of Mammon

Introduction

Mammon in the Tudor Common Wealth

And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations.

—Luke 16:9

This is a book about the Mammon of Renaissance England, as he appeared to English writers and thinkers from the declining years of Henry VIII up to the accession of James I. “Mammon” is an Aramaic word meaning “riches” that appears in two of Christ’s sayings in the Gospels; it is the name of a demon who personifies those riches, who in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* calls himself “God of the world and worldlings”; and we might define the relation of object to personification in Mammon as the principle that “money talks.”¹ That money talks is not, of course, an insight peculiar to the Renaissance. Money is the chattiest and most persuasive of human inventions, bar discourse itself, and the comparison of money to discourse is as old as money is.² Nevertheless, I want to claim that there is something meaningfully specific about Mammon as he is confronted by sixteenth-century Englishmen: something at once historically unique and, in that uniqueness, significant to our understandings both of the English Renaissance and of the material history of money in its relation to discourse.

I will argue that this historical specificity inheres in both faces of the Renaissance English Mammon: in his aspect as material thing, the accumulation of silver and gold coins, and in his aspect as discursive personification. The sixteenth century was a moment of unprecedented and in some ways still unmatched pressure upon its monetary objects, a pan-European inflation so rapid and so sustained as to be known to modern historians as “the price revolution.” This crisis was compounded in England by the wholesale debasement of the

coinage under Henry VIII and Edward VI, from sterling silver to brazen dross, which contemporary observers perceived as the proximate cause of the inflation in England. The reformation of the material purity of the coinage became a central plank of Crown policy throughout the reign of Elizabeth, in parallel to the pursuit of domestic peace and the religious settlement, making the coins that bore her image into material manifestations of the regime's ideology.

The idea that the calibration of monetary instruments could be cited in the same sentence as the juridical keeping of the peace and the theological establishment of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Elizabethan church as convergent instances of a continuous policy—which they are, on Elizabeth's tomb in Westminster Abbey—suggests how the material particularities of Renaissance money shade into what I'm pointing to as a discursive particularity, one which distinguishes the Mammon of the Renaissance from that of modernity as firmly as the crisis of inflation and debasement distinguished him from that of the English past. Our money is the object proper to a discourse, economics, formulated over the past four centuries to account for a particular subset of social behaviors mediated by money—such as saving and exchange—as a domain unto themselves. In the sixteenth century those behaviors of course existed, but the idea that a particular disciplinary discourse needed to fraction them off from other behaviors in order to comprehend them did not.³ Rather, questions of individuals' savings and exchanges, profits and losses, were integral to debates over the shape of the domestic polity—an integrity neatly expressed by the name of domestic polity in English, "commonwealth." For advocates of the political unity of "commonwealth," fiscal, juridical, and religious considerations were continuous in the country's pursuit of a godly and harmonious prosperity. That pursuit was, in the tumults of the sixteenth century, more visible in the breach than in the observance; it is well emblemized by Hugh Latimer's royal sermons of Lent, 1549, in which England's foremost preacher stood before the King and Court to denounce the corruption of the coinage and, through it, of English morals and policies, in the invective of an Old Testament prophet.

The debased and reformed coins of sixteenth-century England present a conflation of material and discursive problems that is unfamiliar and provocative both to the historical understanding of contemporaries and to our historical understanding. The strange provocations of this Renaissance Mammon are heard not only in the endorsement of "commonwealth" within political circles but in texts that do not limit themselves to advocating particular policies to the politically active elite—texts that address broader audiences through the media of theater and print, and that are as concerned with the pleasures that

make those media effective as they are with any specific aspect of policy; that is, the kinds of texts we now call literary. As I'll argue in the chapters that follow, Mammon elbows his way into a dizzying array of literary contexts that seem to have little to do in themselves with monetary exchange. When Spenser's Sir Guyon descends into the underworld in Book 2, canto 7 of *The Faerie Queene*, he is enacting an epic topos that he shares with Odysseus and Aeneas, but Guyon does so to speak not with the dead but with Mammon—with money. To take a contrary example, everyone knows that *The Merchant of Venice* is all about money, but if the characters of that play know it too, they do their best to hide it. Each of the characters insists that he or she is really motivated by something that isn't money and that cannot be expressed in the terms of monetary exchange, on which the three thousand ducats of Antonio's bond just happen to be intruding.

The argument of this book focuses on instances of money's intrusion into literary contexts that otherwise—in the claims of the characters, in the previous establishment of the scene, in the intertextual relations of genre and trope to precedent conventions—don't seem directly motivated by the concerns we'd call economic, those of getting, saving, and spending. I hope that the range of texts, genres, and media that I treat here, which includes Spenser's epic, the drama of Shakespeare and Marlowe, the manuscript elegies of Donne, and the popular prose of Nashe, will indicate the pervasiveness of that intrusion. I have had to be selective rather than inclusive in defining that range; once I began to look for Mammon in the literature of the English Renaissance, I found his face almost everywhere. I argue that there are three reasons for this discursive ubiquity. One, which almost goes without saying, is that it is money's particular job to be ubiquitous: that's what it means to be currency, to be current, that money flows across otherwise uncrossable distances, and over such otherwise insuperable divides as those that characterized Elizabethan social theory.⁴ The second, as I've sketched in above, is that the flexible political category of "commonwealth" means that the appropriate discursive context of money is much broader in Renaissance writing than it is today, and that the mutual implication of fiscal, juridical, and religious contexts is not intellectually scandalous, as it would be today (as a failure of disciplined, properly economic analysis), however morally and politically scandalous may be the behaviors expressed as transgressing the concatenated interest of the commonwealth.

The third reason I propose for this discursive ubiquity of money proceeds from the first two, and is the central claim of this book. A Renaissance coin is at once unitary and disparate, a single thing that is different kinds of things, as

the diffuse continuities of the concept of “commonwealth” suggest. The coin’s value arises from two apparently opposite sources: the precious metal that provides its matter and the stamp of the prince that authorizes its currency. The importance of its material composition makes a coin an object for the discourse of ontology, which analyzes the conditions of materiality; its role as “the common drudge ’tween man and man,” a means of horizontal social relations that construe their participants as peers, makes it an object for the discourse of ethics; and its status as a sovereign production delegated to the good of individual users and of the commonwealth makes it an instance of vertically hierarchical social relations, an object for the discourse of politics.⁵ The writers whom I study use the coin to demonstrate the inseparability of these competing discourses as they converge upon a single, ubiquitous object. I argue that the interaction of material qualities and socially determined values in gold and silver coins propels these objects beyond the circuits of exchange they are minted to serve into literary texts that seek to define the contested relations among poetics, human institutions, and material substance. English Renaissance writers use coined money to present matter itself as a basis of social meaning.⁶ For these authors, an understanding of the world that humans make for themselves relies upon understanding how the material world is made.

The production of money to arbitrate and store values is a paradigmatic instance of the conventionality of the social world—of relations among humans motivated not by divine injunction or example but by material conveniences that manifest themselves as at once arbitrary, contingent, and binding. The chthonic character of Mammon is that of human institutions writ small; he is the demon we have made in our own image. Nevertheless, the authors I study do not propose merely to repudiate Mammon, through ascetic retreat from the material and social world. Instead, they seek to understand why we have made him: what contingent but necessary relations coins exist to facilitate and have come also to embody. These include not only the horizontal social relations among individuals that are the scope of ethics, but also the vertical relations that join those individuals to the body politic whose life-blood proverbially circulates in the form of silver and gold and to the prince whose face the coinage bears. Situated between the material and the social worlds, the coin bears a strange, even parodic likeness to the human bodies among whom it changes hands. For moralists, that apparent similarity can become the ground of an absolute differentiation between the stuff of money and the stuff of life, but it can also make it hard to tell where a person stops and where a coin starts. The coin’s utter dependence on market demand and state power for its form in turn offers a model for the ways in which personhood

depends upon an individual's integration into social institutions. And in order to understand why we've made Mammon as our likeness, these authors strive to understand *how* we have made Mammon: how, through the process of a coin's crafting, this material object comes to generate value.

In examining the work of a coin in terms of its making, my argument construes that coin to be at once a thing and a relation. Physically it is unitary and discrete, easily encompassed by a hand, while conceptually it is a specific combination of two different things—it is the coordination of extrinsic and intrinsic value, through the material imprinting of stamp upon bullion. The coin, itself an interior relation, imposes specific relations between itself and other things wherever it goes: it's that exterior relationality that is its motion. Through the exchange value that is the yoking of its disparate interior values, the coin adequates other objects to itself, and shuttles thereby from hand to hand through the circuits of exchange. Adequation is the relation through which Mammon himself might define the world, according to his own place in it. For Mammon, all meaning is price. But adequation is not definitive of the place of money in the worlds of the texts I study here, which specifically engage Mammon within relations that are not those of exchange. Instead, these texts use coined money to define a variety of larger relations that integrate embodied human selves into the material world. The coin's adequation appears as a common medium and means for these material relations that enfold it, neither as a self-contained relationship nor as an end in itself. I organize the chapters that follow around the diversity of these larger material relations, which, my writers insist, encompass and reinscribe the circuits of exchange within their own meanings.⁷ The material relations between body and world which their coins mediate include those of consumption and instrumentality, which (in chapter 1) I argue Spenser and Marlowe each present as dialectically opposite; that of reproduction (in chapter 2), which Shakespeare assesses in terms not only of the sexual reproduction of bodies but of the imposition of the will to shape events and of authority to shape the commonwealth, in the political plays *King John* and *Measure for Measure*; that of disavowal (in chapter 3), the fetishistic repudiation of money's material centrality, as it manifests itself in *The Merchant of Venice*; and that of waste (in chapter 4), in which the squandered coin becomes the means of materialization for the witty textualities of Donne's elegies and Nashe's prose.

In the following pages of this introduction, I will explicate the terms in which "mammon" arises in the diction of the Gospels, and how those terms open onto the status of coins as privileged objects for the metaphysical discourse of ontology, the analysis of being. I will discuss the place of my coins in

their historical setting, that of the disastrous inflation and debasement of the sixteenth century, and in the analysis of “commonwealth,” through which contemporaries strove to understand and to critique inflationary phenomena. And I will conclude the introduction by referring that sixteenth-century discourse to two strains of current criticism: the “new economic criticism,” which focuses on the relation of discursive and rhetorical categories to the analyses of value and of price, and the criticism of “material culture,” which analyzes what Arjun Appadurai called “the social life of things.”

I. FRIENDS OF MAMMON

Although the history of money reaches back to the preclassical Aegean, the history of Mammon begins with Christianity. In the Sermon on the Mount, according to Matthew, Christ tells his followers, “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Mat. 6:24; all biblical citations KJV unless otherwise noted). In retaining the Aramaic word for “riches” while rendering the rest of Christ’s saying in Greek, the author of Matthew suggested that wealth should be read in the passage as a proper name, demonically personified. “Mammon” was retained by Jerome in the Vulgate and by Tyndale and most of his sixteenth-century followers in English, though the Geneva translators opted against it.⁸ Luke’s gospel also includes this verse (16:13), but prefaces it with the ironic parable of the unjust steward who, learning that he would be fired by his master once his accounts were settled, conspired with his master’s debtors to cheat the master in hopes of finding a new place with one of them. Jesus concludes:

And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely: for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light. And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations. He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much. If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? (Luke 16:8–11)⁹

For Matthew, “Ye cannot serve God and mammon” is one of several parallel gnomic sayings that define faith in Christ as the rejection of worldly cares in

[8] *The Face of Mammon*